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Sinking the German battleship Bismarck: Eavesdropping for victory

The Tracers

ROOM 39. *By Donald McLachlan. 438 pages. Atheneum. $7.50.*

"If Intelligence has come to be associated above all with espionage, violence and skulduggery," writes Donald McLachlan in the preface to this study of British naval intelligence during World War II, "that is the fault chiefly of fiction writers." The real truth is infinitely soberer than the dullest day in the life of James Bond. And yet, as McLachlan shows with a mass of detail, much of it gathered from personal contacts, the tedious processing of data that went on in Room 39 of the Admiralty was indispensable to the war effort and in some cases led to results as glamorous as anything concocted by M and 007.

Paradoxically, Ian Fleming did not serve with the swashbucklers at SOE (the Special Operations Executive) but employed his now famous panache as 17 F, second in command in Room 39. Elegant in elastic-sided sea boots, smoking gold-banded cigarettes impatiently, "he was a skilled fixer and a vigorous showman." Working with him in this clearinghouse of information was a disparate brain trust that at one time included an Oxford classics don, an insurance agent and two stockbrokers. They were the narrow end of a funnel into which poured a flood of numbers and reports from seventeen kinds of sources as diverse as prisoners of war, ships at sea, radio listeners and naval attachés stationed at embassies across the world.

Whip: It took many months before Rear Adm. John Godfrey, Director of Naval Intelligence, had whipped the sagging peacetime bureau he inherited into shape for war. He also had to contend with the inborn prejudice of superior officers trained on shipboard and suspicious of "pencil pushers." Gradually he built up a reputation for reliable advice. By 1944, Room 39 was a major partner in forging strategy. In a sense, the war could not have been won without it.

For openers, there was the submarine tracking room, where every German U-boat's course was plotted on the basis of sightings and radio interceptions. After a while, an experienced listener would begin to recognize characteristic "radio fingerprints" and could even identify individual operators on enemy ships. A picture of each ship's habits was built up and enabled the British to predict with remarkable accuracy where and when it would be safe for cargo ships to sail. This kind of daily plotting in 1943 predicted a U-boat flotilla was about to attack off the Cape of Good Hope.

Sank: Through careful eavesdropping, the British pierced the almost complete radio silence maintained by the huge battleship Bismarck. Once they knew her position and change of course, the Home Force moved in and sank the pride of the *Kriegsmarine* in a matter of hours. The Germans couldn't believe it and sought anxiously for evidence of treachery on their side.

British intelligence predicted the German attack on Russia weeks before it happened. The idea was ridiculed, but events proved the "spies" knew what they were talking about. They barely missed picking the right day.

By the time D day arrived, every inch of the French coasts had been mapped minutely during a series of nighttime reconnaissance landings. Mine placements, high-water marks, sand consistency—everything—was known to the Allies. The Germans remained in the dark, victims of their own faulty intelligence, which prophesied trouble at Calais. Consequently, Project Neptune was taken for a diversion to draw away tanks from the "real" invasion point.

Though he relates stories like this often enough, McLachlan hasn't written a history of intelligence (official secrets make this impossible for years to come) so much as a training manual after the fact. Entire chapters are taken up with lists of sources, techniques, axioms for model behavior in intelligence work. Model behavior, of course, includes getting your ideas carried out in spite of obstruction from above or from other sectors. This was difficult for Godfrey and Co. at best. American intelligence occasionally seems to have advanced the theory a step and solved the problem of dealing with political and military colleagues by avoiding them entirely.

—RAYMOND A. SOKOLOV